

F I L M

A Film and a Filmmaker, Each as Fragile as Life

By LISA KATZMAN

THE experimental filmmaker Warren Sonbert died of AIDS complications in 1995 before he could complete "Whiplash," an aching evocation of the fleetingness of experience, but not before leaving detailed instructions on how the film should be edited. What he did not specify, however, was who should do the work. In distress, his companion, Ascension Serrano, consulted a psychic, who assured him that help with the work would come by sea.

The next day Mr. Serrano received a picture postcard of an ocean liner from the filmmaker Jeff Scher, a longtime friend and former student of Sonbert's. At a screening of both directors' films at the Knitting Factory a year later, a hat was passed to collect money to cover costs of finishing "Whiplash," and the film archivist John Gartenberg offered to lend his support.

A former curator at the Museum of Modern Art, Mr. Gartenberg well understood the fragility of experimental films, most of which exist only in camera originals or worn prints, which is all most filmmakers can afford to create. And the cinematic legacies of artists with AIDS, said Mr. Gartenberg, "are the most endangered."

Through the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS, a nonprofit organization to help these artists preserve their work, Mr. Gartenberg secured financing to complete the editing and to make exhibition prints of "Whiplash." At the request of Patrick Moore, the director of the Estate Project, he then set about designing a preservation pilot project so that the entire body of Sonbert's work — lush, symphonic montages exploring desire, endeavor and mortality — would be restored and readied for distribution, as well as for archival and educational purposes.

Now, a lasting home has been created for Sonbert's work: the films are part of the Guggenheim Museum's collection, and are commercially available through Canyon Cinema. Camera originals and inter-negatives — the intermediary film used to make final prints — have been accepted by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Film Archive as part of its effort to preserve not only Hollywood movies but also experimental film art.

Acting as a liaison between the Estate Project, the Academy and the Guggenheim, Mr. Gartenberg has created a model for film preservation, distribution and exhibition. The fruit of this collaboration is the retrospective running from Wednesday

through May 8 at the uptown Guggenheim Museum's renovated Peter B. Lewis theater.

"This is a very important project for us," said John Hanhardt, the Guggenheim's senior curator of film and media arts. "It's part of our effort to represent the history as well as the contemporary directions of international cinema, and to identify the idea of film as an art form."

In titling the exhibition "Friendly Witnesses: the Worlds of Warren Sonbert," the curators are emphasizing the avant-garde's connection to, rather than its distance from, world cinema. Many of the eight programs

**When AIDS intervened,
Warren Sonbert hadn't
finished 'Whiplash.' It
was saved; he wasn't.**

include the works of other filmmakers. These especially reflect a distinct world or cultural view that had impact on Sonbert's life and work. The first program explores the director's gay identity, the second mines the influence of Andy Warhol; another pairs his films with those of the avant-gardist Stan Brakhage, whom Sonbert referred to as a "hero" of film. One show explores how Sonbert's passion for music (he was an ardent opera buff) influenced his work. Sonbert, who believed that "the divergent rhythms of film and sound get in each other's way," made silent films for 20 years. When he returned to music in the late 80's, the balance he achieved between sound and image in films like "Friendly Witness" and "Short Fuse" was sublime.

Beginning with the recently recovered 1968 "Tuxedo Theater," the films of Sonbert's mature period seem to contain multiple worlds. Shot with a hand-held Bolex during his global peregrinations, they are densely layered with place and meaning. Though his films have been referred to as diaries (Sonbert made extensive use of his friends and travelogues), they are not really. His films foil expectations of confession and documentary truth, yet are rich with anthropological observation and personal vision.

In a sequence of "Friendly Witness" that is cut to the song "Mr. Postman," Sonbert shows us the Taj Mahal bathed in a pinkish glow followed by a shot in similar tones of a man sauntering down a sunny street in Morocco. As the camera pans past him we can just make out the profile of Mick Jagger caught unawares. Making a sly allusion, Sonbert then cuts to the profile of an Egypt-

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Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

"A Woman's Touch," Warren Sonbert's 1983 22-minute silent film, was an homage to Alfred Hitchcock's "Marnie."

tian sphinx.

After accumulating years worth of footage, Sonbert would retire to his cutting room with a specific theme in mind. In his editing, the images took on a new life; uncoupled from literal meanings and quotidian contexts, they became notes or colors. Through visual puns, metaphors and stunning juxtapositions of color and movement, Sonbert built films in which the connection between shot A and shot B produces the intent of shot C. Like the Russian montage master Dziga Vertov, Sonbert saw film as a language, and his work demands to be read; it is hardly surprising that from early on his films found favor with poets.

While it is not always possible to grasp the exact psychological or emotional nuance he had in mind while constructing his "arguments," as Sonbert once called his films, their sensual appeal can be overpowering. He favored the intense color saturation of the discontinued Kodachrome reversal stock, and passages in all of his films verge

on the erotic. The rich chiaroscuro lighting of the gorgeous and rarely seen "Tenth Legion" is especially notable. It's not that the imagery is sexually explicit, but rather that Sonbert imbued the act of seeing with such intense pleasure: The bodies of the lovers he intimately observes are as tantalizing as a Caravaggio nude.

"They're delicious celluloid epiphanies," says Mr. Scher of Sonbert's films.

What emerges from these programs is an expanded esthetic awareness that also pulses through Sonbert's films; the Guggenheim exhibition amplifies the sympathy between the film, art, poetry and music that were the fulcrum for Sonbert's artistic development during the 60's and 70's. This connection between worlds is brought home most strikingly through the program exploring Sonbert's relationship to Hitchcock.

Like most avant-garde filmmakers, Sonbert understood his work as a radical retort to commercial, narrative moviemaking, yet his relationship to Hollywood movies was as

complex as everything in his life. He detested the stranglehold of plot on narrative because it overdetermines the interpretive possibilities of film language. A diehard cinéaste, Sonbert saw everything and could brilliantly discourse on whatever he saw; the acclaimed stylist, Douglas Sirk, and Hitchcock were favorite directors because they undermined plot conventions and, as he once wrote, "the hollow cupidity and superficiality of middle class ideals." In an homage to Hitchcock's "Marnie" called "A Woman's Touch," Sonbert explores similar themes of female enclosure and escape.

The cultural perspective of the Guggenheim retrospective suggests that Sonbert's greatest legacy may be the compassionate equanimity of vision that undercuts even his ironic self-appraisal as a "friendly witness." "We are privileged viewers of many sectors of humanity," he once remarked, "none taking precedence over the other." □